

Sophia, Wisdom Woman
Proverbs 8:1-4, 22-31
June 3, 2007

Confederate Army General Simon Bolivar Buckner, whose West Point friendship with Ulysses S. Grant survived the Civil War, liked to tell the story of an old resident in his Kentucky home who was celebrated for his down-home wisdom. “Uncle Zeke,” a young man once asked, “How does it come you’re so wise?”

“Because,” said the old man, “I’ve got good judgment. Good judgment comes from experience, and experience, well, that comes from poor judgment.”

Today we celebrate the wisdom our graduates have gained through their studies, and we hope that they will continue to be lifelong learners, for our world is full of more than we can ever know even in lifetime. Beyond academic studies, Old Zeke is right – we gain much knowledge from our mistakes.

There is another source of wisdom lifted up in our scriptures from Proverbs this morning. One of the many images of God offered in the Bible is that of the Wisdom Woman. She has become more fondly known as Sophia, for *Sophia* is the Greek word for wisdom. In our Protestant Bible Sophia is found in the book of Proverbs. She is also found in several books of the Apocrypha, which is a series of books not included in the Protestant Bible.

Sophia is a multi-faceted being, just as is God. In the scriptures she is depicted as sister, mother, lover, chef and hostess, preacher, judge, liberator, and establisher of justice. She is a symbol of divine power ordering and delighting in the world. She is active in the world, both in nature and in human beings, interacting with them to lure them along to the path of life.

This morning I want to lift up two aspects of her nature: her role in creation and her role in human life. We heard from Proverbs a speech given by Woman Wisdom. She claims that she was the first of God’s creations. “The Lord created me at the beginning of his work, the first of his acts of long ago” (8:22). She was present before the seas, mountains and earth were formed.

Not only did she witness the creation of the world, she worked beside God, “like a master worker.” The original word for “master worker” refers to someone who has a wide range of knowledge, practical skill, and expertise. It can be a counselor, advisor, or scribe. Woman Wisdom is pictured as an architect associate of God at the creation of the world. She is

an advisor, assisting the Creator in putting all things in order and issuing decrees of justice which become the standard of justice for human rulers.

The scripture goes on to say that God delighted in Sophia. A counselor who gives good advice is a source of delight to the one counseled. In the ancient Near East, building projects, especially cities, palaces, and temples were a source of delight both in their execution and in their completion. As God looked upon the finished creation and saw that it was good, God was delighted. God rejoiced with the one who assisted God in the created order.

It appears that Sophia is a partner with God in creation. Perhaps she represents the intelligence or wisdom with which God designed the world. Maybe Sophia is the Logos or Word or Christ, which the Gospel of John says was in the beginning with God when all things were created. Sophia might be the breath of life that was breathed into all creatures inspiring them to life. We cannot be certain of her exact nature, but the scriptures affirm her presence in the act of creation.

Sophia also plays an active role in human life. Proverbs portrays Wisdom Woman offering her speech at the city gate. In ancient cities, the gate was the location where people gathered to conduct the business of life. At the gate they would buy and sell their wares, settle disputes, and arrange marriages. It was the place where justice was executed. Here prophets would advise kings. At the city gate life's basic transactions and transitions would occur. Decisions were made, thresholds crossed. People entered into new situations and embarked on new journeys.

Today it is difficult to pinpoint one particular place comparable to the city gate. Some of the work happens at city hall, some at places of employment, others at the grocery store or mall or restaurant, and much of it happens at home. The idea is that the city gate was a central location through which people passed regularly and conducted the business of life. That is where Woman Wisdom sets up her pulpit, at the very place where life decisions are being made. The crossroads where Wisdom takes her stand is literally "the house of ways." As people stand at the crossroads and seek the right path, she offers her insight, wisdom, and counsel.

Wisdom encourages people to walk in the ways of wisdom as opposed to the ways of folly. There are two women located at the city gate, a wise woman and a foolish woman. Those who choose the way of Wisdom embark upon the path to life. Those who choose the way of Folly find themselves on a path of death and destruction. God's wisdom excites, inspires, lures, invites, and unites. Foolishness is seductive, blind,

entrapping, deceitful, and devouring. The preacher Wisdom bids people to leave their foolish ways and walk in the ways of wisdom, insight, life, and peace. She continues to be an agent of creation, offering humans new life.

We are faced with a multitude of decisions throughout our lifetimes – daily routine decisions and major life decisions. How do we decide? How do we discern which path to walk? It is wise to consider the alternatives and look at which ways lead to life and which ways diminish life. Which ways inspire, excite, invite, and enthuse us? Which ways drain, harm, trap, or consume us?

We can use our imagination to visit Sophia God at the city gate, at the crossroads of our lives, and seek her guidance. In visualization we can picture a wise woman and seek guidance from her. In a journal we might dialogue with Woman Wisdom. There are sages among us through whom God's Wisdom might be discerned, who can help us choose the path that leads to life. Another way to seek wisdom is to be still and listen to our own inner voice where Wisdom is speaking to us.

Prayer is a helpful means of tapping divine Wisdom. Flora Wuellner shares a prayer that she uses in discerning God's will for her life. She prays,

God, if this new activity...relationship...interest...personality change...is right for me, let it take root and increase in my life. If it is wrong for me, let it become less and less important to me, and let it decrease in my life.¹

The image that comes to mind as I think about Wisdom is a continuous river of water weaving around the globe, a river to which all people have access. It is the river of Wisdom Water. All are invited to dip a cup into the Wisdom Water and drink of insight, truth, and delight. Be refreshed and renewed.

The Wisdom Woman is one of the many faces of God. She helps us expand our understanding of God. Her presence enriches our life and faith. At the crossroads of life, her wisdom points us toward the way of life. I commend Sophia, the Wisdom Woman, God's master worker to your care and counsel.

¹ Flora Wuellner, “Were not Our Hearts Burning within Us?” *Weavings*, November/December 1995, p. 31.

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